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A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH



REPRINTED FROM THE
JOURNAL OF THE ILLINOIS STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY
JULY, 1912

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A Biographical Sketch



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HENRY GUEST MCPIKE.

(1825-1910)

A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH.

Henry Guest McPike (second son of John Mountain McPike and Lydia Jane Guest, his wife), was born in Lawrenceburg, Dearborn County, Indiana, July 6, 1825. Both his grandfathers, "Captain" James McPike (1751?-1825), and Captain Moses Guest (1755-1828), as well as his great-grandfather, Peter Dumont (1744-1821), were "soldiers of the revolution" under Washington. His great-grandfather, Henry Guest, was an American patriot, of New Brunswick, New Jersey, whose residence is (1912) still standing in that city.

The subject of this sketch, born within four miles of the residence of General William Henry Harrison, the hero of Tippecanoe, was an early observer of those sectional feelings which are so quickly manifested in a place situated as was his native town, Lawrenceburg, on the Ohio River. Those days preceding the Mexican War were epoch-making and filled with many events to culminate in the great Rebellion. His father, John Mountain McPike, as we have elsewhere stated, was the editor of a Whig newspaper in Lawrenceburg (*circa* 1834) devoted to the abolition of slavery.

From his forefathers, paternal and maternal, Henry Guest McPike inherited the patriotic fervor and love of freedom which had incited their lives. Thus in later years he became a man of public spirit whose active business-life and fixed determination were large elements in his success.

Removing at an early age to Wilmington, Dearborn County, Indiana, he there numbered about his youthful associates the late James Mills, Esq. (whose sister, Sarah, married the late Hon. John M. Wilson), and the late Joseph

Bruce, Esq., of Memphis, Tenn. Their mutual friendship was formed during a period when public events were fast leading to a political and military climax. Many were the interesting anecdotes and exciting incidents which, in years gone by, the writer was privileged to hear related. Dearborn County, as has already been remarked, was on the immediate border between the slave-holding and free states. Fugitive slaves were a frequent sight and the "*Underground Railway*" was in full operation. Hand-bills offering large rewards for the recovery of slaves were commonly to be seen, and the town of Wilmington then was not wholly free from a certain transient or irresponsible element composed of those ever ready to derive personal profit at the expense of some unfortunate creature. But the seriousness of life was occasionally relieved by some episode of an amusing character.

* * * * *

Henry Guest McPike, while a young man, was nominated by the Hon. O. H. Smith of Indiana (then a Member of Congress) for appointment as cadet at West Point, but as it was found that the privilege belonged to another district at the time, the nomination was withdrawn.

Having removed with his parents to Alton, Madison County, Illinois, in December, 1847, he lived there until his decease in 1910, much of that time at his residence, "Mount Lookout Park."

The series of debates between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas, at various points in Illinois, terminated at Alton on Friday, October 15, 1858. History preserves a clipping from the *Alton Daily Whig*, reciting the local arrangements and committees. "Messrs. H. G. McPike and W. C. Quigley be a Committee having charge of the platform and reception of ladies, and have power to appoint assistants."

"On motion, a Committee, consisting of Messrs. W. C. Quigley and H. G. McPike, be appointed to publish this programme of proceedings."

In November, 1860, Mr. McPike, accompanied by the late Hon. Lyman Trumbull, went from Alton to Springfield, and was in the telegraph office with Abraham Lincoln as the returns came in from the first election. It was also early in the "sixties" when Mr. McPike, in a private capacity, but still in the line of a patriotic duty, accompanied a military organization known as the Yagers from Alton to Springfield, where he met Governor Yates and Captain U. S. Grant. Not long after came the news of the latter's promotion.

Alton, notwithstanding its nearness to Missouri, was not backward in affording the Federal Government both moral and financial support. A branch of the "Union League of America," known as "Alton Council No. 41," was granted a charter by the State League, on February 9th, 1863. As the original charter was in Mr. McPike's possession in March, 1898, it is possible that he acted as Secretary of the local organization, of which he was a charter member. Appointed to act as deputy provost marshall of the (then) Twelfth Congressional district, at a critical time, he did good service for the War Department, and resigned his office April 24, 1865.

After the Civil War came the efforts to resume what in America must be called a normal commercial or industrial life. The gazetteer or directory of Alton for 1866, shows the firm of McPike & Newman, real estate agents. The former was then and long afterwards a Notary Public. He became the Alton representative of several fire insurance companies, and Secretary of two having headquarters in that city.

About 1869, he commenced the erection of his residence in Mount Lookout Park, comprising some fifteen acres, where he lived the remainder of his life, and where he sought relaxation among his trees and rare shrubs, his vineyards, fruits and flowers. From the south balcony, on the second floor of the house, one could easily see the pyrotechnic display on a clear Fourth of July night, in the city of St. Louis, about eighteen miles distant, owing to the advan-

tageous location of the building on an eminence a mile north of the Mississippi river, but just within the city limits of Alton. Mr. McPike had a strong aversion to dogs; nor would he suffer a bird on the place to be disturbed. He delighted to count the different species of songsters who, in turn, endeavored their best to repay him for their freedom from molestation.

Accustomed to arise early in the morning, a friend to cold water and outdoor life, he brought to bear upon each day's mental work, a vigorous constitution, a clear brain and a steady eye. His was a nature at once intense and temperate. He abstained from all spirituous liquors, but with old-time hospitality, maintained a wine-cellar of generous proportions. He was agile in manner, and could, when almost seventy years of age, vault over a fairly high fence at a bound. He was of a dark complexion, but with this exception, a description of the great astronomer Halley (1656-1742), by a contemporary, might aptly be applied to him, and as the coincidence is marked we will quote the old chronicler: "He was of a happy constitution and preserved his memory and judgment to the last, as he did also that particular cheerfulness of spirit for which he was remarkable. . . . In his person, he was of a middle stature inclining to tallness, of a thin habit of body and a fair complexion, and always spoke as well as acted with an uncommon degree of sprightliness and vivacity."

Having long been interested in the improvement of the Mississippi river, Mr. McPike attended the River and Harbor Convention which met in Washington, D. C., in February, 1882, as a vice-president from Illinois. He had also been connected with previous conventions held in St. Louis, Memphis, Peoria and New Orleans. In July, 1882, he had some correspondence with John A. Logan, then United States Senator from Illinois, on this general subject.

In the spring of 1887, Mr. McPike was elected Mayor of Alton, and held that office for four years. During the

fearful floods of the Mississippi river, near Alton, in 1892, he was made Chairman of the Relief Committee, and in that capacity had several conferences with Governors Fifer and Francis of Illinois and Missouri. Much damage was wrought in the lowlands of Missouri just opposite Alton, and the waters of the two great rivers intermingled.

Mr. McPike always had a lively interest in horticulture, and met with remarkable success in the development of the mammoth McPike grape, a seedling of the Worden, having, therefore, the Concord for its grandparent. Its public reception cannot, perhaps, be better described than by the following quotation from the *Chicago Daily News* for November 3, 1897, at which time the Chicago Horse Show and Horticultural Exhibition was being held in that city:

"H. G. McPike, ex-Mayor of Alton, Ill., came to the Arena at 11 o'clock with enough blue ribbons on his lapel to stock an ordinary show. The horsemen crowded around him and learned that Mr. McPike cared not for hackney or hunter, that he had taken the blue ribbons for the best exhibit in the agricultural end of the show. . . . Mr. McPike winning out on a black grape as large as a tennis ball."

In September of the same year, Mr. McPike had attended the annual meeting of the National Pomological Society, held in Columbus, Ohio, and was elected a vice-president for Illinois.

Although not an extensive traveler, Mr. McPike visited various portions of the United States, including California and Washington, D. C. In the latter instance, he seized the opportunity to go to Mount Vernon, the home of Washington, for whose character he had great admiration. He took delight in the fact that some of his own ancestors served in the war of American Independence.

Some of the early months of 1909 were spent by Mr. McPike near St. Petersburg and Tampa, Florida, to escape the more rigorous winter in the north. The following year, this trip was repeated and was extended to include a visit to Havana, Cuba. Returning home to Alton

about the middle of April, Mr. McPike contracted a severe cold while superintending some improvements on his estate. He was ill but a few days and died on April 18, 1910, in the eighty-fifth year of his age. He was thrice married and left surviving issue, two sons and two daughters. His remains were interred in the City Cemetery of Alton, at a point near the south-west corner overlooking the Father of Waters.

We cannot close this little sketch without making special mention of Mr. McPike's deep interest in subjects of history, local and general. He was a member of the Illinois State Historical Society. In his will, a lengthy document written by his own hand, are these bequests:

"I hereby give and bequeath to my brother William C. McPike (of Kansas City, Missouri, since deceased) the bound volumes of publications of our Father, the late Judge John McPike; also a book of Travels and Poems, the author being our Grandfather, Moses Guest of New Jersey; also the revolutionary looking-glass; these items, during his life-time and at his death to go to my son John Haley McPike, and at his death to his oldest living son."

Mr. McPike owned an island in the Mississippi river, just opposite Alton, which was the reputed location of the famous "duel" between Abraham Lincoln and General Shields, in 1843.

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